



Meaningful Service: Identifying Genuine Needs

Assets and Needs

How might you ensure students engage in learning that is meaningful for them and for the community? This document helps you explore the assets and needs in your community as you and your students develop and plan service-learning experiences.

Personal/individual assets and needs

Our individual **assets** are our strengths — the skills and characteristics that we are proud of and that we know we're good at.

Our personal **needs** are skills or characteristics we would like to develop because we feel they would improve our lives.

- In the smallest circle on the next page, write two or three of your personal strengths. List these under “assets.”

Examples: “Good listener.” “Know how to put things together.”

- Also in the smallest circle, list two or three things you would like to improve about yourself. List these under “needs.”

Examples: “Public speaking ability.” “Better math grades.”

School community assets and needs

The **assets** in our school community include the strengths and abilities of the individuals in that community and of the group as a whole. The resources in the school community are also assets.

The **needs** in our school community are the areas that could be improved for the safety or well-being of the people in the community or the facility itself.

- In the middle circle below, write down two or three strengths or resources in your school community. List these under “assets.”

Examples: “Involved parents.” “A DARE group.”

- Also in the middle circle below, write down two or three things you think could be improved at your school. List these under “needs.”

Examples: “No more bullying.” “Broken school sign.”

Larger community/neighborhood assets and needs

The **assets** in our neighborhood include the strengths and abilities of the individuals in that community and of the group as a whole. The resources in the neighborhood are also assets.

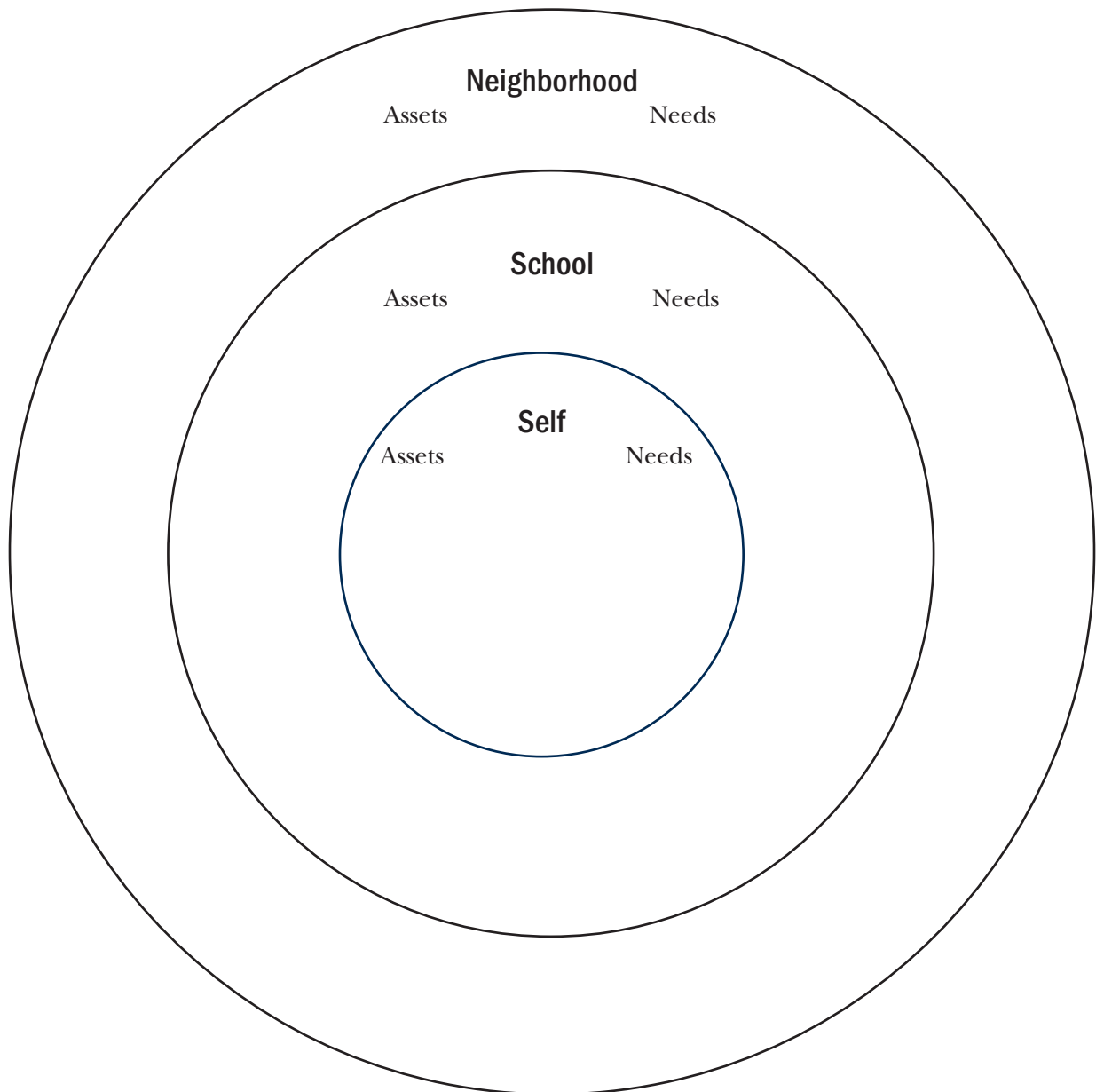
The **needs** in our neighborhood are the areas that could be improved for the safety and well-being of the people in the community or the area itself.

- Now, move to the largest circle and write down two or three strengths or resources in your community. List these under “assets.”

Examples: “Great community center.” “Neighbors who care about kids.”

- Also in the largest circle, list two or three things you think could be better in your neighborhood. List these under “needs.”

Examples: “Local park not safe at night.” “Icy sidewalks in winter.”



Once you've filled in the circle, spend some time reviewing and reflecting on them. Then, consider these questions:

- Do you see similarities in the assets in yourself, your school, and your neighborhood? What about needs?
- How could the various assets you identified be used to help meet the needs in your school and neighborhood?
- How could your own assets be helpful in meeting these needs?
- Are some of the assets groups of people who might be able to work on the needs? If so, which ones?

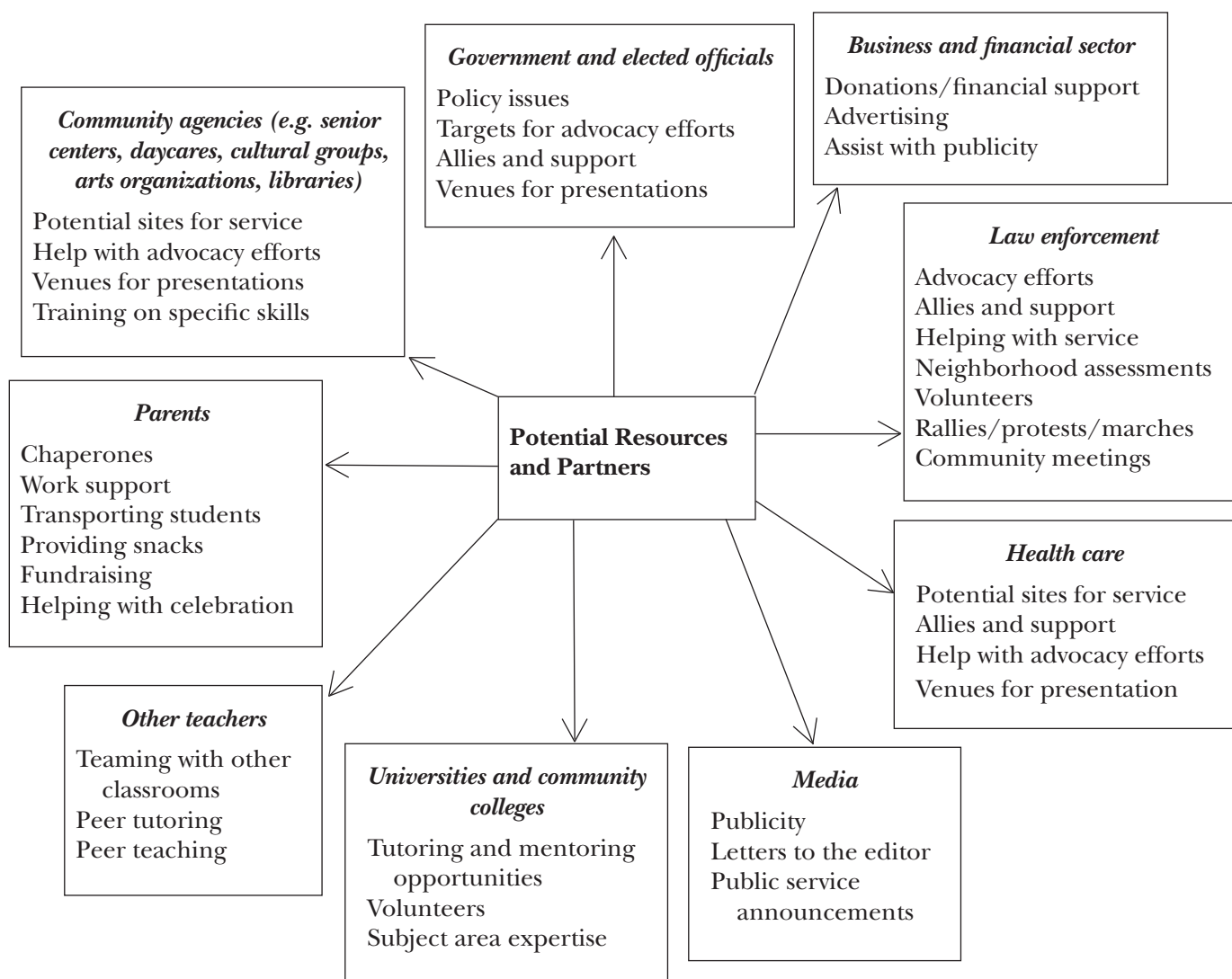
Also, consider sharing your list of assets and needs with your classmates. Then, consider these questions:

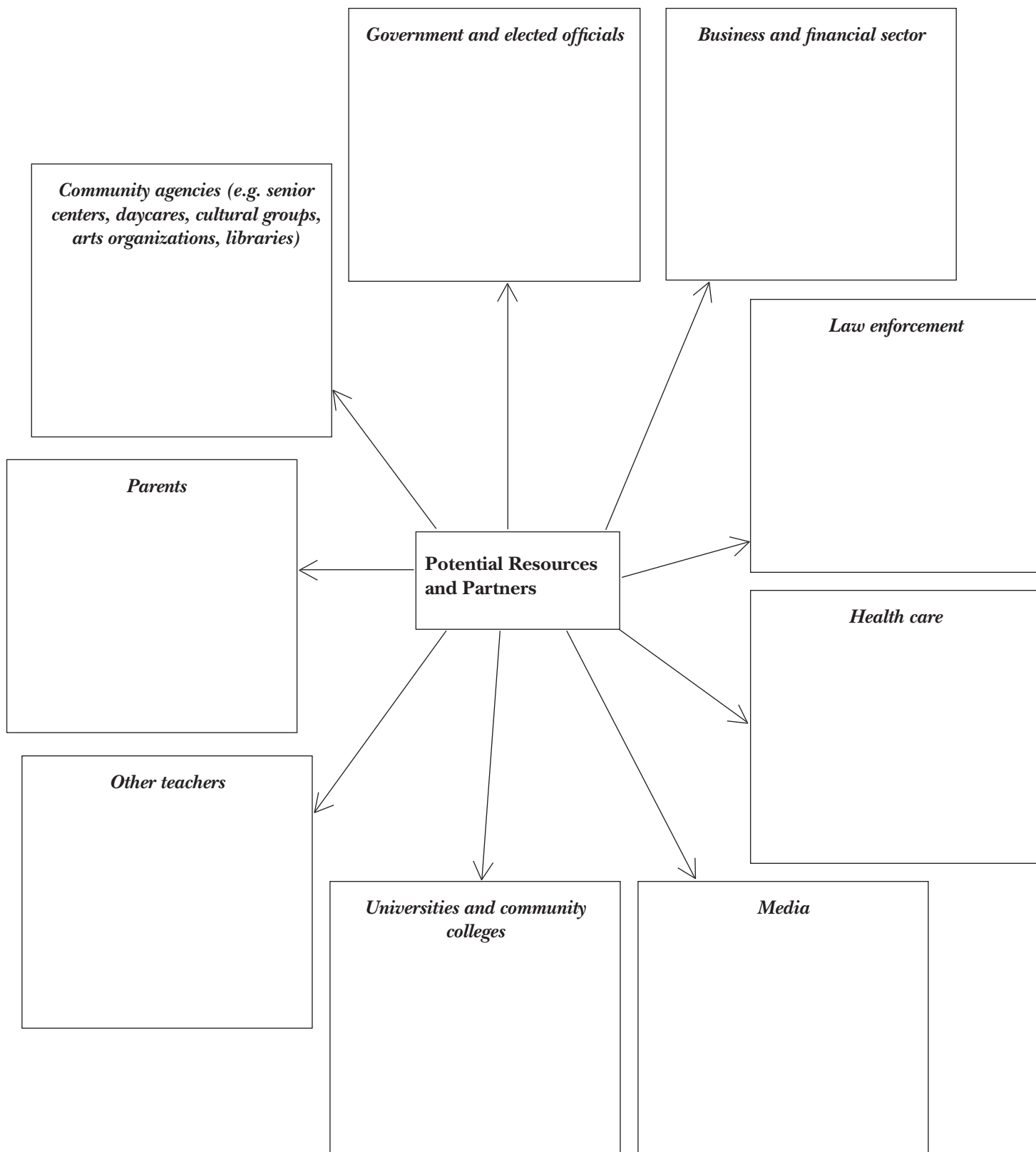
- Did you identify any of the same assets and needs? If so, which ones?
- How many personal assets do you share with your classmates?
- How many are different?

Mapping Community Resources

Every community has resources available to help meet the needs of the people who live there. This handout can help you think about and locate the resources in your area. Businesses, schools, churches, organizations, and governmental bodies might be able to help you select an issue to tackle or provide resources to help you address it. Create a resource map, like the example below, to highlight potential sources of assistance.

The sample map below shows some of the resources your community might have available and the kinds of support they might be able to offer your classroom. Students might want to keep this in mind as they think about their projects.





WalkAbout Checklist

Mapping your community using the WalkAbout method — a walking “field trip” of the school neighborhood to observe its assets and needs — requires some preparation. Here are some things you should plan to have in place ahead of time.

At least one week before your WalkAbout is scheduled ...

- ☐ Send home parent permission slips for students to participate as needed. Also obtain parental permission to use photographs of their children in the media, newsletters or other public events. (See samples below.)
- ☐ Arrange for additional chaperones to lead groups of students as needed. One chaperone for every six students is advisable. Volunteer chaperones can be other teachers or school staff, older student or college-age volunteers, AmeriCorps, VISTA, or SeniorCorps members, parent volunteers, community partner staff, or others.

At least two days before your WalkAbout is scheduled, be sure to have the following items in place:

- ☐ Signed parent permission slip for each student.
- ☐ Safety/accommodations information and supplies for students (emergency card information about outdoor allergies/bee stings, information on necessary accommodations for students with disabilities, emergency medical kits, if necessary).
- ☐ Neighborhood maps and route information (one detailed map for each group).
- ☐ Clipboard for each student.
- ☐ Pen and paper for each student.
- ☐ Observation chart for each student.
- ☐ Digital cameras for each group so students can record images of the neighborhood.

Assets and Needs Observation Chart

Name _____

Group members _____

Guide

WalkAbout: Conducting a Neighborhood Assessment

A WalkAbout, or walk-through to create a map of the school neighborhood, is a great way for students to begin understanding what authentic needs could be met through service-learning. This activity calls for students to engage their senses for observation as they evaluate their real-world community during the walk, identifying community assets (resources and strengths) and significant needs and challenges.

Before the WalkAbout

1. If you haven't already done so, discuss assets and needs with the students to help them think about what those terms mean and give examples on the individual and school level. Explain that during the WalkAbout they are going to apply that understanding to the larger community.
2. Brainstorm what we mean by "community." Ask the students:
 - "Is your school a community?"
 - "How big does a community need to be? Are there maximum or minimum sizes?"
 - "What should we consider our community for the purpose of doing some work to help improve it?"

Agree upon what the group will identify as their community or neighborhood (for example, the school campus, the school campus and a five-block radius, youth center and area within, X, Y, Z streets).

3. Assign one guide or chaperone per group of six students, and assign different starting points for each group. (The six students in each group may be broken into three pairs, or teams.) You can give each team instructions to look for different kinds of thing that affect the neighborhood: physical infrastructure (sewers, hydrants, traffic lights, street lights, bus stops, subway stops, etc.), and assets (fire department, nursing home, library, park, etc.), human resources (friendly neighbors, police officers and fire fighters, etc.).

During the WalkAbout

1. Have the groups conduct a tour of the selected area and identify key places, organizations, and institutions in the community.

Questions to consider during the WalkAbout:

- Where do people congregate?
- What are the most important businesses in our area?
- What recreation facilities, schools, associations, congregations, and other neighborhood institutions exist?
- What social assets exist, such as different cultures, ethnicities, and age groups?

These will be identified as **community assets** — the good things a community has to offer.

2. As the groups walk, students should observe and write what they consider to be needs or problems in the community.

For example:

- Do they encounter homeless people on the street?
- Are there safe, productive, and fun places for children to spend time after school?
- Do they sense tensions among neighbors?
- What problems or issues do they find in the neighborhood?

These will be identified as **community needs** — what the community is lacking.

After the WalkAbout

1. Bring the small groups of students together in a large group, to share what they found, both as assets and as needs. Use a large piece of paper, blackboard, or whiteboard to record participants' observations under the two columns: Assets and Needs.
2. Discuss common themes among the participants' observations. Broaden the discussion by asking the group what items they would add to the lists — other assets and needs they are aware of but may not have observed directly during their walk (e.g., assets might be in the form of a well-known neighbor who is very active in the community, or a youth-friendly store manager; needs might include elderly residents who they know are isolated, or children they know are unattended during certain hours).
3. Give students time to reflect individually in their journals. Suggest answering these questions:
 - Describe something that you noticed that you hadn't in the past.
 - How did it feel to look at a familiar area through "different eyes" in recording assets and needs?
4. Use dot-voting, fist-to-five, or criterion-based decision-making to help students select a need to focus on for their service-learning project.

Ways to Identify Needs

Conduct Surveys.

Students can design surveys for a variety of groups to gather information on what people see as important issues in their communities. Creating survey questions, deciding how to administer the survey, and collating the resulting information, analyzing what the data show, and deciding how to act on that data can provide important real-world experiences for students. Audiences they might consider surveying include:

- Other students in the school
- Teachers and other school staff
- Community members or community organizations

Collaborate with Existing Programs.

Find a partner who is already working to address a need in your community and offer your assistance. Existing programs may have the structure, resources, and contacts to help you develop a successful project.

- Community education
- Park and recreation boards
- Service organizations such as the Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, NAACP, American Association of University Women, and more
- Department of Natural Resources
- Nonprofit organizations
- Local government agencies

Identify Key Public Issues.

What are the important issues facing your city or state, nation or the world? Students can list some of these issues by reviewing headlines and articles in the local paper or other media. Comparing local headlines to national and international headlines in papers of record such as the New York Times or Washington Post can help them find issues of local and global importance, and see connections between what's happening in their community and what's happening in the rest of the world.

Conduct Interviews with Local Leaders.

Invite community elders and leaders in to your classroom for interviews or discussions with students to explore topical areas or intergenerational or intercultural issues. Through preparing thoughtful questions, recording the information they learn, and analyzing what they've heard, students may find both areas of need they can address and partners to help them in their work.

Transforming Community Needs into Service-Learning Projects

After students have identified genuine needs in their community, the next step is to consider how they can address that need through a service project, and how they can connect that service project to their overall learning goals. You can guide students in this process by making them aware of the learning goals they must achieve and then facilitating a brainstorming and decision-making process. The chart below gives some examples of how needs can be transformed into projects with both a service and a learning component.

Community Need	How It Was Identified	Service Connected to Learning Goal	Learning
Local hospitals experience a shortage of blood.	Story in the local news.	Students help run blood drives for the Red Cross, and create educational materials and presentations for peers, family, and community members on the importance of blood donation.	Biology of blood-matching, persuasive writing and speaking, and organizational skills.
Bridging the age divide between older and younger students in an elementary school.	Classroom discussion on community.	Sixth-graders collect information about younger students through interviews and create “buddy books” to foster positive relationships between the grade levels.	Writing and conducting interviews, working on collaborative writing projects, improving interpersonal skills.
Contemporary community lacks awareness of the stories of local veterans who served in conflicts.	Local historical society presented need and asked students for assistance.	Eighth-graders visit with local members of the American Legion and gather information about serving the country in times of war. Students create documentaries about soldiers’ lives that are archived at the historical society.	War and other armed conflicts in U.S. history, connecting individual stories of service to larger historical events, conducting interviews, creating narratives that combine historical information and personal stories.
Community is diversifying and lacks understanding of new cultural and ethnic groups.	News article on the increase of immigration and personal stories of conflict in the community.	Seventh-grade students study immigration in geography class, compare Census statistics with a survey of their community, and involve community partners in creating a showcase of ethnic and cultural groups.	Students address geography and social studies standards, learning about the immigrant groups in their community and the cultural traditions.
Voter registration is low.	Statistics released from the secretary of state’s office and classroom discussion.	After learning about voting trends and patterns in civics class, high school students design a voter registration drive. Students plan the campaign and partner with the League of Women Voters to increase awareness about upcoming elections.	Understanding elements of the election process, persuasive writing and speaking, cooperative learning and collaboration skills.

Essential Question for Students

Reflecting on what you bring to a service-learning project can be helpful as you begin to think about designing a project. Think about your community and the role you play as a student and a member of that community.

Community

How would you describe your community? What makes your community special?

What questions do you have about your community?

What ways are you already involved in your community?

What does your community expect from its members? What does it need?

Personal Relationship

What do you care most about in your community?

What skills and qualities do you have or would you like to develop to give to your community?

I believe that...

Obligations

What are your obligations to your community?

How do your values fit in with your community obligations?

How can you meet these obligations?

Partners

Who in your community shares your ideals and values?

Who might help you meet your obligations to the community?

Your Classroom

How do you contribute to your classroom community?

How do your classmates contribute?

What are your obligations to your fellow students and your classroom?

Student WalkAbout Journal

Reflecting on what you bring to a service-learning project can be helpful as you begin to think about designing a project. Think about your community and the role you play as a student and a member of that community.

Neighborhood Resources

Describe something you noticed during your observation walk that you hadn't noticed in the past.

Did you see things differently from the other students in your group? What were the similarities and differences in what your group members observed?

Explain how it felt to look at a familiar area through “different eyes” in order to record assets and needs.

What would you like your neighborhood to look like in five years?

What assets can you imagine it having?

How can you help it develop those assets?

All Lift materials are based in the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, available at www.nylc.org/standards.

Lift Raising the Bar for
Service-Learning Practice

Copyright © 2009 National Youth Leadership Council. All rights reserved.



1667 Snelling Avenue North, Suite D300 | Saint Paul, MN 55108
(651) 631-3672 | www.nylc.org